"WHO NEEDS THE CHURCH?"
Ezekiel 37:1-6
Luke 4:14-21

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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
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This is a private, housekeeping kind of day in the life of Bethany Presbyterian Church. We have assembled a Church Fair in all the rooms and fellowship hall, and for a half hour or so after worship you are invited to inspect the displays which tell the story of what this church is doing. At 12:30 we are going to eat a meal together, followed by a program which will focus on internal matters like budgets and individual pledges for 1974. And it occured to me that if you are a guest you may feel a little like an intruder at a family discussion. Please don't: for the day presents an opportunity for raising a rather basic question, whether you are a member, prospective member or a visitor, namely: "Who Needs the Church?"

In approaching that question I would begin with two observations. The first is that the church is in a radically changing situation, and even in the midst of change remains essentially an alive, healthy institution. The second observation is that our culture is not early as secular as we are told it is. Let's look at each of them briefly.

One way of viewing the Church of Jesus Christ in 1973 - in this country - is to conclude that we are in serious trouble. Many people feel that the church resembles nothing so much as that assemblage of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37: dry, brittle, lifeless; an institution that is slowly dying or already dead, waiting only for the funeral. Statistical reports seem to document this point of view. The traditional, main-line churches in America continue to lose members. For several consecutive years the United Presbyterian Church, along with the Methodists, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ and others have shown declining membership roles. In addition, there is a severe financial squeeze. While church members are giving more to their churches than ever, the churches themselves are commiting less each year to benevolence and mission. In the United Presbyterian Church this has meant the near dismantling of the National and International Mission structures that were built up over the years. Our church will have about half of what it had ten years ago to spend in mission. We have depleted our reserves in order to forstall the day of reckoning which is now upon us. And so we're adjusting, tightening the belt, restructuring. And, In one sense, it looks for all the world like a venture that is in serious trouble. ~~Inner city churches are folding up in despair; rural congregations can't cope with spiralling costs and there is~~ and there is

a monumental amount of wailing and gnashing of teeth among us.

And yet - and yet - way back in 1816 John Yeats observed: "The churches are dying like an out-burnt lamp." To which the great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick responded, "Mr. Yeats forgot something. The first essential of the quiet funeral is a willing corpse, and the churches are certainly not that."

-cite Reformation

We have a history of weathering crises. We've been in trouble before. We have 2,000 years going for us plus an undying faith in a God who uses the church for his purposes: who does breath life into the creaky bones of the institution. And in the midst of all the gloomy despair about the future of the church the only really legitimate conclusion I am able to draw is that there will be one. That God will indeed continue to renew and reform and re-enliven his church: that we are not dying, merely living through a period of rapid change.

The second observation is that our society is not nearly as secular as has been touted recently. Now, that's a rather brave assertion in view of the literal tidal wave coming in the opposite direction. Over and Over again we are told that what is radically new about our time is that people don't need God or religion amymore. We have come of age, it is the "post-Christian" era; science, technology, affluence have conspired to muscle God out of the game altogether.

And yet there are other signs: signs that seem to be indicating that rather than becoming a secular people we are more than ever a spiritually hungry people. Consider the fascination of youth culture with the transcendent in drugs and music: consider the phenomemom of transcendental meditation: the interest in Zen and other eastern mystery religions: the popularity of assorted gurus from the east. Consider the general rejection of materialism as a life style, the renewed interest in Jesus as a man and model: consider the unlikely phenomenon of religion classes burgeoning on college campuses - and of course Godspell and Superstar.

What does all that mean except that we are in the middle of a full-scale religious renascence. It's not happening in the church: but it's happening, out there - where all the people are. David Read looks at the conflicting data and concludes: "There is a yearning for the divine dimension coupled with a deep distrust and rejection of all organized religion" (Overheard, P.22)

That's what is distinct about our situation. If I can introduce a new set of metaphors the situation looks like this. We have hungry people and a full supermarket. For some reason the people aren't buying. Maybe the supermarket is offering the wrong food: maybe the packaging is poor: or the prices too high. Whatever the reason - these two facts constitute a basic understanding of the situation for the Church in 1973. I saw a cartoon recently that expressed the dilemna very concisely. The setting is a side room off a large, Gothic Church. Two trustees are counting a very small offering. The minister is watching with a look of abject despair on his face. One of the Trustees is holding an offering plate with a few coins in it saying "Jesus Christ Superstar has already grossed thirty million. Just where did we go wrong?"

Who needs the Church? Let's discover who's asking that question: why they're asking it and if we have anything to say in response.

My experience is that one group of people who are asking "Who Needs the Church?" are those who are suspicious of institutions, per se. And I believe it is a mistake to underestimate this as a major direction in our society at this time. In any case, the position may be expressed like this: "Jesus was a simple carpenter: he was direct in his dealings with people: he was uncomplicated: he went around doing good and teaching that it's better to love than to hate. He certainly didn't mean for his message to become incarnated in anything so ostentatious as, say - the Vatican. He didn't anticipate or intend anything like a Church with New York Offices and Executives and Computers. In fact all the paraphenalia of the institutional church flies in the face of its founder's simplicity."

Now, that objection needs to be taken seriously because it is, in part, accurate. And yet, no great idea ever lived very long without a movement and an organization. The story is told about the Edinburgh Music and Arts Festival. After a modest and informal beginning it quickly became a highly organized and sophisticated affair. Some people objected - spontaneity was lost. And so they got together to return to the original spirit of the festival. The result? Today there are two organizations with committees and fund raisers and all the rest. The only difference is that one group wears ties - the other wears jeans. Revolts against organizations don't get far unless they organize. ~~In the final analysis, the only trouble with popular revolutions against the established institutions is that they~~

~~inevitably create their own institutions, which inevitably start to behave like the ones they replaced.~~ More to the point . . .

It is not possible to enlist Jesus as a supporter of non-institutional religion. In our New Testament Lesson we read that "he went to the Temple, as his custom was." Everything we know about him indicates that he found institutional Judaism offensive. He spent most of his life arguing with its beaurocrats. But he stood inside. He did not suggest that religion exists in any way apart from an organization.

~~Christianity is always uncomfortable with its institutions. When we've become too comfortable we end up in trouble. As so we need to be reminded that our Lord was simple, uncomplicated and direct when we begin to value particular structures and traditions too highly. And yet to suggest that the Church — or the faith can exist apart from an institution is simply foolish.~~

Another group of people who ask the question are those who say that faith is an individual, personal matter. "I believe, but I don't need the church." It is a very popular position, probably the majority position - and it is impossible to maintain with integrity - if we are talking about the God of the Bible. To be sure, Jesus called men one by one, as individuals. But the first thing he did with them was weld them into a group. The Christian Community - the Church, if you will , was there from the beginning. To believe in Jesus Christ was - and is - to stand within the body of people - the community of faith. And to miss that: to overlook the community is to miss what he was about altogether.

In centuries past the theologians used to say, "There is no salvation outside the Church." Protestants ordinarily balk at that even though the Reformers put in those terms also. But it is honest with the New Testament insofar as it identifies the Church - The Christian Community as the result of the Gospel. Now, let's put to rest the unspoken anxiety here. We do not mean that if you don't join the church you're going to hell. What What we do mean is that the Christian faith is incarnate in the Church of Jesus Christ. You can believe in some vague, celestial Santa Claus apart from the Church. But the moment you take seriously the God of Abraham and Issac, the God and Father of Jesus Christ,- you find yourself drawn to the people - the community - the fellowship - in which his name is revered, his presence celebrated and his mission performed.

Other people who ask ("Who Needs the Church?") are those who regard religion as irrelevant to the major concerns of the day. And, again, we have to deal with an objection that is valid. There is much of what goes under the name of Christianity that is irrelevant. And yet - there is no institution in our culture that is not desparately playing "catch-upball" today. That's part of the problem: the other part is that a lot of people are so fatiqued by our rapidly changing world that they are sick of relevance. In a sense, then, the church has to decide who it's going to offend: the people who want us to be on the cutting edge of social change or the people who want to be comforted and shielded from the threat of social change. I dontinue to be a loyal Presbyterian because I see my church trying to be honest at this very precarious point. And suffering because of it: trying to meet people where they are in life and trying to follow where God is leading.

Others ask the question: ("Who Needs the Church? - It's full of hypocrites") And I've stopped arguing that one. Of course it is, no one ever said it wasn't. There is a great gap between our model and our behavior, but I don't know any other group that claims the Son of God as its model. We are constantly stabbed by our own ideals - thank God. But to reject the Church because there are hypocrites in it makes no more sense than quitting the Babe Ruth Junior Baseball League because everybody can't hit like Babe Ruth.

("Who Needs the Church?") We're unaccustomed to self advertisement. We don't often blow our own horn. But today, this once - let's celebrate who we are. Let's allow what this Church is doing to answer the question. Now, I confess that I'm partial. I love this congregation. I have not found many like it. In fact I have friends in the ministry who have encouraged me to move - not out of concern for me - but so that they can apply for the job. Let me answer ("Who Needs the Church?") by telling you what you mean to the community.

Bethany Presbyterian Church has been significantly involved in the formation and implementation of The Community Emergency Fund, The Food Pantry, The Lincoln Center Clothing Room. We have been directly involved in the establishing of the Lafayette Urban Ministry and its various programs - summer camps, adventure clubs and Senior Citizen Visitation. We were there at the beginning when the Emergency Transportation Service was born, and today we provide the office space for that operation and many of the volunteer drivers.

This congregation was deeply involved in the formation and operation of Citizens for

Better Housing, Project Commitment, and the Home With Hope - a half-way house for Alcholics. We were there and deeply involved when University Church came into being. All of that and more - our money - our people - our commitment.

Let me tell you "Who Needs the Church?" by listing some of the people who use this building. The [illegible]y Nursery School - with its excellent program and scholarship opportunities. The Tippecanoe County Foster Parents organization meets here. Al Anon meets weekly in the Parish House. Women's Exchange, a new organization for the support of women who seek counseling meets here several times a week. We look forward to providing space for one of Welcome Wagon's services for new residents. And Scouts - we sponsor and house Boy Scouts, Explorers, Girl Scouts, Cubs and Brownies. All of that - because we're here.- and we care - and in the name of Jesus Christ we see our being here in terms of helping and supporting others.

"Who needs the Church?" Sometime I'll write abook aobut the quiet compassion of this Church. Two weeks ago one of our members asked if I'd come out to Ross Annex and lead devotions. And when I got there I saw five women from this congregationvisiting with a small group of lonely elderly ladies. I didn't even know it was happening.

Internally this Church answers the question "Who Needs It?" with the traditional types of programs - all of them happening because you make them happen and because others need them to happen. Church School, YOuth Club, Adult Studies, Worship, four Choirs, Bible Study, Circles, Ambassadors, Mariners. All of that, and in the meantime while the trend is in the opposite direction we are giving more money to the Mission of the United Presbyterian Church, not less, and showing modest, but regular numerical growth.

Beyond our immediate life together, the Presbytery of Wabash Valley has a Mission Statement and Covenant that resembles our own because it used ours as a model. But perhaps your influence is best illustrated by what I know is happening in other churches because members of this congregation are there now: a new Youth Club in Columbus, Ohio, for instance, innovative worship services in Mississippi, a new building in Pittsburgh, a close friendship in Georgia, a young couples group in Connecticut, a new Deacon's organization in Missouri.

"Who Needs the Church?" I believe our nation needs the Church in a particular way at this hour. We are at a critical juncture. Norman Cousins, in a recent editorial held up

the senseless crimes of violence that are happening on our streets, the equally senseless violence we leashed over the skies of S. E. Asia, and the growing cynicism of our people about the integrity of the political process itself, and asked pointedly, ("What's Happening to Us?")

Who will defend the sanctity of life? Who will hold out for the dignity and worth of the individual? Who will insist that deception need never be synonymous with politics? Who will hold out for hope in the future and trust as a risk worth taking and integrity as the final necessity for our survival? I'd suggest that the nation needs the Church today more than it needs anything else.

"Who Needs It?" You do. I do. We need to know that there is a God. That love is better than hate. That giving is better than getting. That life is more powerful than death. That there is grace. And put very simply I don't know where else that is said and remembered and celebrated. Last Sunday ~~- you and I - put it all on the line~~. Two people brought their infant girl into this sanctuary to receive the sacrament of baptism. A young mother who was herself baptized by this Church. And at this moment (after spending the night flying over the Atlantic) they are ~~somewhere over the NORTH Atlantic on their way to a new life in Germany~~ getting off their plane in Frankfurt Germany - to begin a new life - far from their china - And in affirming their faith - & receiving from the Church the seal - promise of God's love for their baby girl Sunday - they answered the question - ("Who Needs the Church?") more eloquently than all the statistics and theological rationales in the world.

"Who Needs the Church?" The world, the nation, the community, you, me - that family ~~over the Atlantic~~. in Germany . .

B. Davie Napier put it in a poem - and let this serve as our prayer:

John 14:6

I am the way; I am the truth and I am the life ...~~John 14:6 NEB~~)
Time to rejoice - because we know the Way.
Not that we always take the Way, not that we do not sometimes lose the Way;
but we rejoice because the Way is there and we will always find the Way again proceeding from our battered, broken, disappointing, here and now, to then and there, where we are whole again, where their is dignity again, for all of us. For all of us.
Time to rejoice - because we know the Truth. Not that we always live the Truth, not that we do not sometimes contradict the Truth, disown the Truth, pervert the Truch, deny the Truth, but we rejoice because the Truth has come to us, will never let us go - the living Truth, nonstatic, never sterile because it is the Way, at one with Way, and always on the Way.
Time to rejoice because we know the life. Not that we always hold the life, not that we do not sometimes spurn the Life annul the life, smother the life and wound the life; but we rejoice because the life is always being given us - the Way, The Truth, the Life, that are the light of all the human family, prevailing over chaos, bitterness, and death, and shining on in darkness rendered impotent. Time to rejoice - time to receive the gifts of Way and Truth and Life. Time to rejoice AMEN